

Inequality and the Religious Left

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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“Today we must say “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality, says Pope Francis.

“Such an economy kills,” he says.

Last week, a young immigrant woman in New Jersey died of carbon monoxide poisoning while napping in her car between shifts at two of the four jobs she worked in order to make ends meet. She was one of approximately 7.5 million Americans working multiple jobs to cobble together a living, many from employers who pay far less than a living wage and hire only part-time in order to avoid providing benefits like health insurance.

Her life was precious.

Her death was a tragic accident; one that highlights the hardship and despair of our economic system, in which a small few prosper wildly while millions of Americans work harder and harder only to barely scrape by, or worse, fall through the cracks entirely.

In such an economy, Pope Francis says: “Human beings are themselves considered goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a “throw away” culture, which is now spreading.”

In our country this throw-away culture is nothing new.

Three weeks ago, just down the road in Ferguson, Missouri, African American teenager Michael Brown was shot six times and killed by a white police officer. He was one of more than 200 black men killed *each year* by police, security guard, or vigilante.

His life was precious.

His death was a tragedy; its circumstances an outrage carrying centuries of traumatic resonance... the 300 year old throw-away culture toward black and brown bodies upon which our United States of America and its economic system were built.

Such an economy kills. Such a throw-away culture kills and always has...

Slavery and whipping.

Sharecropping and lynching.

Segregation and beating.

Mass incarceration and police brutality.

Poverty wages and despair.

Economy and violence.

Systems that carry us with them as they march along –

Systems teaching unarmed black teens and armed white police to fear each other with tragic results for all,

paying poverty wages to the many that the few may prosper,

saying that some bodies, some people have less worth than others.

It is time once more, as it has been again and again, to connect the dots.

To make visible the systems that strip away dignity and steamroll justice. Systems that deny the humanity of some – and throw into question the humanity of us all.

We must name that the American economy was built upon a systematic dehumanization of workers and work through the economic institution of slavery – a system that brought and brings great wealth to a few at the expense of the many – and a system that lives among us now in both racial injustice *and* economic indignity.

But we may also recall with hope that the American religious left was born immediately in its wake, in opposition to its evils. And that the same religious left calls us still amid tragedy and every day – calls us to relationships of solidarity, hope, and hard work toward something better for all people.

Indeed, just as our economic system cannot be untied from our country's racial history, *neither* can be untied from communities of resistance that have since our nation's founding insisted upon humanity amid inhumane circumstance.

Lest you think when I speak of the birth of the religious left that I am speaking about us... Not quite.

Religious historian Dan McKanan points out the true origins of the religious left was a movement of resistance that rose up amid the very population upon whose backs our nation sought to build itself. In his article "The Religious Left," in a 2009 UU

World Magazine, McKanan writes:

America's religious left was born not in the theologically liberal churches that would embrace Unitarianism or Universalism but on the shores of colonial Virginia and South Carolina, where enslaved Africans found the strength to keep living in the songs, dances, and rituals of their traditional faiths. It took on a new flavor when the children and grandchildren of those Africans discovered a message of liberation in the sacred books of their captors. "Let my people go!" thundered the God of Exodus. These words, coupled with the protective amulets of African folk religion and the international network of Freemasonry, inspired a series of insurrections that rattled the slave system. And in the "free" but deeply segregated north, black preachers Richard Allen and Jarena Lee refused to accept secondhand status in the white churches, creating "African" congregations to honor the principle that there is "neither slave nor free" in Christ.

He continues: "The religious left expanded as European Americans listened to the testimony of African Americans. The Quakers were among the first."

The Unitarians and Universalists followed, as did Calvinists, and Methodists, Catholics, and more. Coalitions of religious activists of many socioeconomic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds lived their faith in the 19th century first through abolitionist movements, then through suffrage, temperance, and prohibition movements, and labor organizing. In the early 20th century, bolstered by an influx particularly of Jewish and Catholic immigrants, the religious left engaged in the Social Gospel demanding a living wage for all and safety nets for the vulnerable, and in the 1960s it gained momentum and power through coalition building in the Civil Rights Movement.

As McKanan writes: "Despite its recent prominence, the religious right is only about thirty years old, while the religious left has a genealogy that stretches back more than two centuries. In every generation people of faith have brought their bodies and spirits to the causes of human freedom, racial and gender equality, economic solidarity, and global peace. Catholics and Calvinists, theological liberals and evangelicals, adherents of indigenous spiritualities and immigrants of every faith have worked to extend the radical vision of the American Revolution to all peoples."

The religious left, at its best, has always done just what it is we are called to do now: name and work toward a deeply moral agenda based in a systemic understanding of intersecting injustices, and build diverse coalitions based in relationship building and solidarity.

Indeed, Martin Luther King Jr. is one example for us in the art of moral agenda setting – taking on injustices at their root, rather than simply treating their symptoms, and recognizing the intersecting issues at hand. He particularly

connected the dots between racism, materialism, and militarism, all leading to the intertwining evils of racial injustice, economic indignity, and violence. Each of these evils, he preached, deified life-denying forces and denied the inherent and interconnected worth of each the human soul. His moral agenda-setting is a model for today's religious left, as we seek to move from responding willy-nilly to moral crises and instead name an overarching agenda that puts human worth and dignity above all else and applies to every breach of said dignity.

Another key element of the religious left, historically, has been its make up as a broad and diverse coalition. A diversity that the religious right has never seen. The religious left, indeed, is *defined* as a broad coalition of theologically diverse people of faith united in their commitment to social justice as defined by the resistance to systems of oppression.

Thus, to assume that all religious people committed to the agenda of the religious left are theologically liberal would be a grave mistake. African American churches, for example, have been key participants in the religious left, often from a theologically traditional or orthodox point of view. Catholics and some evangelicals, often traditional in beliefs regarding some cultural issues, have nevertheless led in the religious left's commitment to economic justice. In past decades, the religious left has thrived not in spite of, but because of its broad and diverse coalition.

However, from the 1980s on, with the rise of the religious right and the moral majority, the religious left largely ceded the public square. And this may have been in part a result of the so-called culture wars, as the religious right framed moral debates around issues that were divisive to the theologically diverse coalitions of the religious left – splintering these coalitions into issue-based groups.

In the 80s and 90s particularly, Catholics who might have worked with liberal Protestants on economic issues were suddenly pulled away by activism against abortion and stem cell research. African American congregations who might have partnered with liberal Jews on civil rights issues were suddenly at odds about LGBTQ equality.

The movement lived on, but was weakened by these divides as well as an increasing secularization that found the liberal wings of every faith traditions losing members and influence as many Americans rejected the need for religious institution altogether.

Concurrent with the weakening of the religious left by culture wars and secularization, the evil twins of racial and economic injustice have been quickly and powerfully on the rise.

Since 1970, the black-white income gap has risen by 40%, the racially-applied drug war has created a crisis of mass incarceration in communities of color, and schools

have become increasingly re-segregated through complex factors of housing and tax policy and courts releasing school districts from civil rights era mandates. At the same time, an insidious insistence on a surface level color-blindness has made it difficult to maintain a wide scale public examination of racism or racist systems.

Accompanying increasing racial injustice has been the perpetually deepening economic inequality spread across every group and sphere of American life since 1970s. This kind of division of wealth hasn't been seen since the height of the roaring twenties, nearly a century ago. Wages stagnated sometime in the mid-70s, labor unions declined rapidly, and the gap between the rich and the poor has become enormous as the middle class has dwindled. In a stunning statistic: the top 1% of American families now holds more wealth than the bottom 90% combined, and the poor are the most vulnerable they've ever been, jobs paying less and becoming scarcer as social safety nets are being stripped away.

So that's the situation we face today. An economy that kills and devalues the person. A throw-away racist system that kills and devalues the person. What are we religious lefties to do?

Well, I'll tell you... I am hopeful. I find great hope in the unlikely coalitions I see forming on issues of dignity, harkening a resurgence of a strong and united religious left - Hope in the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina, where LGBTQ clergy and activists are sitting at the table with pastors who have preached against marriage equality and hashing out differences in service of dignity. Hope in the immigration justice movement where UUs and Evangelicals are joining hands and singing marching songs.

Hope in the work happening here in Missouri through Missouri Faith Voices, a faith-based community organizing group founded to advance economic dignity and racial equity. Particularly as we have sat together with the grief and rage of the death of Michael Brown and subsequent events in Ferguson, I have felt seeds of hope blossoming within my heart. New relationships are forming. We are doing the hard work of breaking down the barriers in ourselves and building bridges in our community. We are working to humble ourselves before one another.

We are putting into practice what I think might be the most important lesson of the religious left - its history and its present. And that is this. Make connections.

We must make connections between issues or problems that seem distinct. Find the places where things tangle together, for that is where we must loosen the knots. Educate ourselves about the intersections of race and class and globalization and climate and sexuality and more. Learn all we can in humility and curiosity.

And then, perhaps most importantly, we must make connections with others. Reaching out to those from whom oppressive culture would have us divided.

Reaching out to those who may think and experience and feel and even know differently than us... but who love alike. We must connect, and then we'll get somewhere.

I invite you to try this tomorrow, on labor day, as we celebrate the gains we've made and remember how much work is still to be done. Have a real conversation with someone who may challenge you, really listen to someone different from you, especially if it feels scary. Talk about the pain of a culture that denies dignity. How does that culture hurt you? How does it hurt all with whom we are intertwined? Connection is where we begin.

This is about all of our lives, all of our worth, all of our dignity. This is us, beginning to resist a culture that kills.

We are listening for our lives.

We are learning for our lives.

We are working for our lives.

We are reaching out for our lives.

We are being transformed for our lives.